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ABSTRACT

The extent of deficiencies in critical reading skills among 153 entering college students enrolled in basic skills reading courses at New Mexico State University was studied. Forty-nine percent of the sample were Hispanic Americans. The students were administered the Nelson-Denny Reading Test and the scores were converted into grade equivalents. While 79 percent earned scores below what would be appropriate for high school students, scores of 8 students were equivalent to the fifth grade or below of elementary school. Among persons who scored deficiently, three reasons were discerned: eccentricities of a test or incidental circumstances that influenced test scores; inadequate functional reading skills; and lack of sensitivity to the full range of critical reading tasks. It is concluded that prefunctional readers require individualized remedial instruction, and those who can read functionally but not critically can benefit from basic skills instruction. The two major instructional foci of critical reading courses are the specification of diverse critical reading tasks and the constraints exerted on those tasks by specialized texts. The establishment of programs that employ alternative measurement instruments to monitor the critical reading skills of entering students is recommended. (SW)

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Critical Reading Deficiency --
Cause, Scope, Remediation

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What is encompassed by critical reading at the university level? One way to define critical reading is by contrast with functional reading. Persons can read functionally if they can extract information from a text to achieve goals that they themselves have established. Whereas functional reading responds to self set goals, critical reading is directed toward the resolution of problems established by others. Thus some persons might possess the functional skills needed to read a magazine effortlesses when they set the limits of this task. However, when someone other than those readers establishes the criteria for successful reading, this second task, a critical reading task, could be inaccessible. Additionally, functional reading skills are restricted to genres of materials with which readers are experienced. Critical reading assumes that persons can transfer skills to specialized texts outside of familiar genres.

Quite often college applicants view themselves as competent readers. They read regularly from predictable types of texts and extract successfully the information for which they are searching.

It is with alarm and confusion that examinees react to failing scores on the verbal portions of admission tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test or the American College Testing Program Assessment. Such tests require students to respond to a full range of extremely restricted tasks with passages that are unlike those they confront normally.

During the past two decades, the critical reading skills of highschool students, to the extent that these were reflected in the scores on verbal portions of admission tests, have declined predictably. To some extent this decline mirrors changing attitudes toward standardized tests as a result of the reduced impact that the tests have on decisions about admission to college. Additionally, the demographic porfile of persons who take admission tests has changed. Some observers have pointed out that the accessibility of information through nonprinted media is responsible for declining verbal scores. These arguments are interesting and probably correct as sociological explanations of why test scores have declined. However, a question still remains as to the academic impact of deficient reading scores. Do persons who score in the lower percentiles on critical reading tests constitute a homogeneous group that cannot use texts to meet the requirements of college courses?

To answer this question, a sample of 153 students in basic skills reading courses at New Mexico State University was tested. The elective courses were designed to improve the reading skills of the enrollees. The sample comprised students from six colleges at the

University (Table 1). Forty-nine percent of the persons described their ethnicity as American Spanish. Thirty-nine percent described themselves as American not affiliated with a minority group. The remainder of the sample members included small numbers of students from minority groups other than Spanish American. The Nelson-Denny Reading Test was administered. Reported correlations between this test and the verbal portion of the American College Testing Program Assessment, the test required for all students admitted to New Mexico State University, have ranged from .57 to .65. Scores on the Nelson-Denny Reading Test were converted into grade equivalents (Table 2). Seventy-nine percent of the persons in the sample earned scores below that which would be the equivalent earned by an entering college student. Eight students earned scores that would be appropriate for elementary students in the fifth grade or below.

Upon first examination, these data seem extremely distressing. However, all persons who receive the scores equivalent to those of highschool students, or even those equivalent to elementary school students, are not a homogeneous group of equally disabled readers. Among those persons who score deficiently on a critical reading test may be persons at three distinct levels of development. Figure 1 represents a critical reading stage and two stages of precritical reading. Persons at any of these stages could fail a critical reading test. The etiologies of those failures would be distinct for different cases and the appropriate response could be correspondingly divergent.

TABLE I

College Affiliations of Students in Sample

College	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Agriculture	15	10%
Arts & Sciences	31	20%
Business	23	15%
Human & Comm Serv	41	26%
Education	11	8%
Engineering	32	21%
Total	153	100%

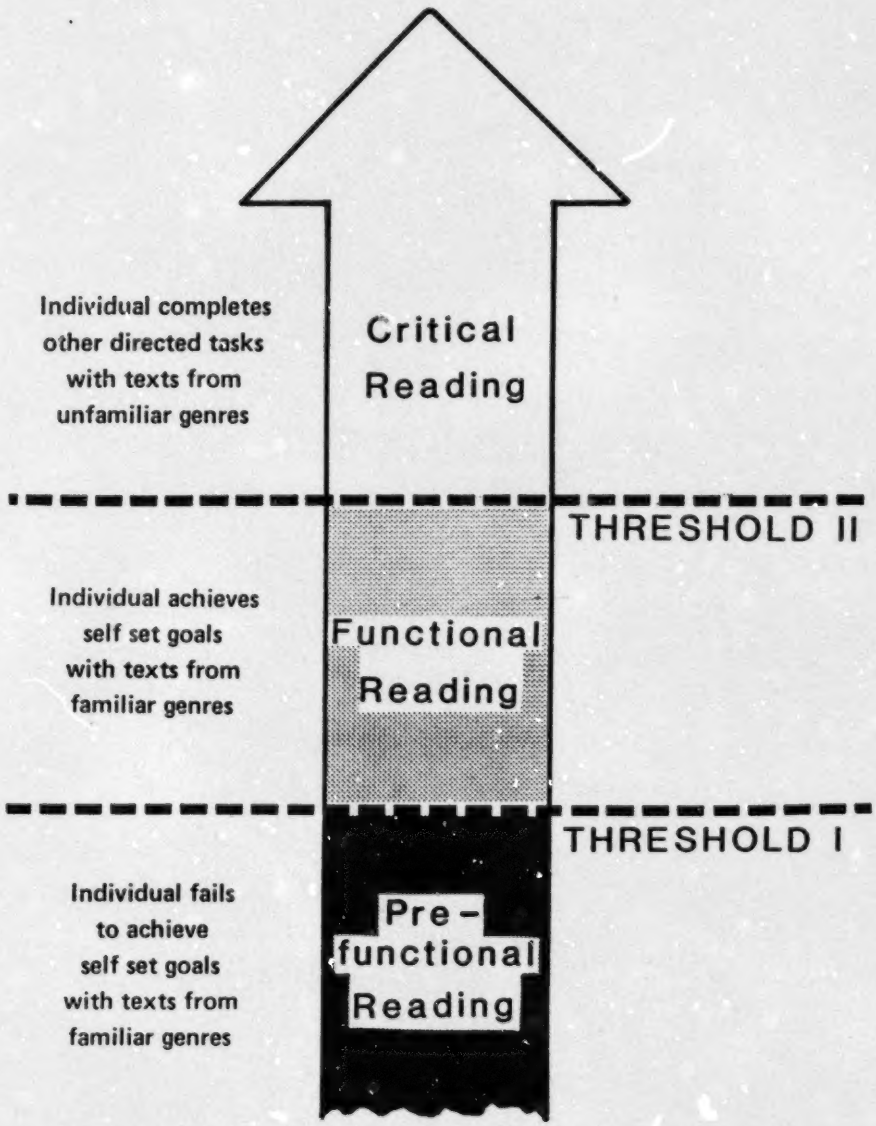
TABLE 2

Grade Equivalents of Critical Reading Test Scores

Number of Students	Grade Equivalents of Reading Scores
1	3.1 - 4.0
1	4.1 - 5.0
6	5.1 - 6.0
2	6.1 - 7.0
15	7.1 - 8.0
12	8.1 - 9.0
15	9.1 -10.0
29	10.1 -11.0
17	11.1 -12.0
20	12.1 -13.0
15	13.1 -14.0
10	14.1 -15.0
5	15.1 -16.0
5	16.1 -16.1+
Total 153	

FIGURE I

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL READING


Individual completes other directed tasks with texts from unfamiliar genres
Critical Reading
THRESHOLD II
Individual achieves self set goals with texts from familiar genres
Functional Reading
THRESHOLD I
Individual fails to achieve self set goals with texts from familiar genres
Pre-functional Reading

Students who are adept critical readers, persons with skills developed beyond threshold II in Figure 1, can score poorly because of factors such as unpreparedness for the test, because of idiosyncrasies of the test that do not complement the examinees' problem solving skills, or because of irregularities in the administration of the test. In such cases, students enrolled exclusively in content area courses can be examined several months after failing a test, with a test comparable to that which they failed. And their scores can improve dramatically.

As an indication that equivalent, deficient scores on tests do not indicate persons with a common etiology for that deficiency, 28 students were examined. The freshmen students were examined at the beginning and at the end of 15 week basic skills reading courses. The range of grade equivalents to the early semester tests was 3.8 to 15.2. The mean gain for the group on the late semester test was 2.37 grades. There were two persons in the group who respectively made gains of six years and seven years.

Truely, can persons improve their reading skills so dramatically in such a brief period? If they could, the materials and methods employed in those courses should certainly be marketed; for the graduate students responsible for the teaching would surely become wealthy enterpreneurs. If not common sense, our experience persuades us to suspect the validity of the reading gains that have been documented. If a person has required 18 years to progress to

a level of reading characteristic of a fifth grader, there are no arcane strategies that will transfer that person quickly and effortlessly to the plane of reading appropriate for a highschool or college student. The persons who demonstrated advances of six or seven grades assuredly would have demonstrated gains if they had not participated in critical reading courses; the gains could have resulted from circumstantial changes or the adaption to a university environment. Instructors who work with genuinely disabled readers in clinical settings are aware of the time and effort required to advance the skills of a genuinely retarded reader one full grade level.

Just as there are persons who make astronomical gains in reading programs, there are persons who make no gains whatsoever. These are persons below threshold I, persons who have deficient functional reading skills. And finally, there are persons who are between threshold I and threshold II.

Which of these groups requires remedial instruction? Persons beyond threshold II don't require remediation. They may require a different test. Or they may require time to mature or adapt. They need to be monitored, to confirm that they can be successful critical readers; but they do not require remedial instruction.

Persons who are below threshold I, prefunctional readers, require remedial instruction. However, their level of disability is so severe that they are unlikely to benefit from university courses. They might be counseled to find a tutorial type of instruction to

reduce their problems. Only after having successfully completed this instruction could they participate effectively in university studies. The individualized remediation that prefunctional readers require is always expensive and often below the minimal baseline of scholarship that defines the missions of colleges.

If there is a group that can benefit from basic skills instruction, that group is composed of persons between threshold I and threshold II, a group characterized by the ability to read functionally but not critically. These persons can read effectively and autonomously -- but they have difficulty transferring these skills to restricted tasks with specialized materials.

Consider the case of private firms that prepare persons for standardized tests. These firms advertise that they can increase clients' scores on tests administered by Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program. After participating in a half-dozen workshops, clients will have improved their scores -- or their several hundred dollars in tuition allegedly will be refunded. One can be certain that such refunds are uncommon. The workshops cannot, in several hours, raise aptitudes for programs in law, medicine, or graduate school. And yet the workshops demonstrably can change the scores that are correlated with these aptitudes. What is provided in these workshops is a bank of information about the predictable eccentricities of the testing materials. Once aware of these idiosyncrasies, clients can make decisions about how to adapt skills they've already developed to the testing circumstances.

For parallel reasons, a basic skills critical reading cour cannot remediate functional reading deficiencies efficiently. The comparatively modest goal of such courses is to define the problem that students are confronting. In a recent survey of British college textbooks, fifty-one verbal commands were identified as frequently occurring reading task delimiters (Table 3). Depending on the tasks that are specified, students should read the identical passage in distinct manners to be successful. To respond to different tasks it can be appropriate to isolate details, abstractions, main ideas, extrapolations, or the relationships between any of these. The two major instructional foci of critical reading courses are the specification of diverse critical reading tasks and the contraints exerted on those tasks by specialized texts. Such courses assume that students are beyond threshold I, that they are unable to apply the functional reading skills they have already mastered.

Summary

How pervasive is critical reading deficiency among entering college students? Critical reading test scores were reviewed to indicate that 79% of the persons in a sample drawn from basic skills reading courses achieved the scores that would be appropriate for highschool and even elementary school children. The pattern of test scores

TABLE 3

Frequently Occurring Words in Critical Reading Tasks

Survey	Respond
Examine	Value
Explore	Organise
Memorise	Reason
Know	Demonstrate
Evaluate	Remember
Analyse	Judge
Infer	Discriminate
Summarise	Deduce
Recognise	Assess
Recall	Create
Appreciate	Consider
Extrapolate	Discuss
Translate	Conjecture
Synthesise	Describe
Apply	Explain
Interpret	List
Identify	Represent
Construct	Hypothesise
Arrange	Appraise
Locate	Criticise
Select	Review
Outline	Precis
Find	Discover
Create	Compare
	Invent

Source: Harri-Augstein, S., Smith, M., & Thomas, L. Reading to learn. London, England: Methuen, 1982.

complements a two decade decline in verbal scores on college admission tests -- a decline that many have equated with the erosion of critical reading skills. However, evidence was reviewed to demonstrate that critical reading scores are not all impervious to instruction. Though some persons don't respond at all, others respond with dramatic advances during brief periods. Among persons who score deficiently, three subgroups can be discerned. 1) Some persons score deficiently because of eccentricities of a test or because of incidental circumstances that influence the test scores. 2) Some persons score deficiently because of inadequate functional reading skills. 3) And some persons score deficiently because they lack a sophisticated sensitivity to the full range of critical reading tasks and to the peculiar patterns of printed materials in the diverse academic disciplines. The research reviewed in this paper supports the establishment of programs that employ alternative measurement instruments to monitor the critical reading skills of entering college students. Additionally, this research provides a rationale for instruction as an efficient means of meeting the needs of at least one group of deficient critical readers.

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